

The Viking voyagers



PHOTO: STEFAN JONASSON

The Norse encampment at L'Anse aux Meadows had not yet been discovered when Val Bjornson spoke about the certainty of the Norse voyages to North America

Val Bjornsson (1948)

Iceland was the earliest link between the old world and the new, almost a thousand years ago. Parenthetically, it might be mentioned that Iceland was in wartime and remains today a strategically significant link between those hemispheres, used still by America in maintaining a communications line with our occupying forces in Germany, across one of the world's largest airports, southwest of Reykjavik, and used in still greater measure by the commercial aircraft of the leading nations of the world.

I was a bit surprised when I was informed that the Honorary Vice Consul for Iceland here in Minnesota was to have the first three in this series of broadcasts. It shouldn't take nearly that long to recount the contributions of a few thousand Icelandic immigrants to America, no matter how boastful one might become. I wonder, however, whether Dean Thompson didn't have in mind in arranging this unusual sequence the earliest link between Iceland and the rest of Scandinavia, on the one hand, and America on the other. I am going to proceed on that assumption, and begin, thus, at the beginning, particularly since next Saturday, the 9th of October, is Leif Erikson Day – an event which another St. Olaf faculty man certainly has in mind, Dr. Glasoe, head of the Greater Leif Erikson Monument Committee, that group whose aim it is to erect a statue of America's Viking discoverer on our State Capitol grounds during Minnesota's territorial centennial year of 1949.

Iceland's early link with America comes long before the birth of Leif the Lucky, son of Erik the Red, at Eiriksstadir in Haukadalur in Dalasysla, in southwest Iceland – a few miles, by the way, from where my own mother was born. One goes back to Norway to trace these ties. And I'd like to interject at this point that there is just one thing I hope may be gained through the next few minutes of this broadcast – and that is to eliminate doubts, if any there be, in the mind of any listener anywhere, about the historic validity of Leif

Erikson's discovery of America in the year 1000. It isn't just something to be treated with an indulgent smile – a shrugging, “Oh, yes, those Scandinavians again – swelling their chests about some fanciful claim that historians have never accepted fully.”

Despite all the space that grade and high school textbooks give to the voyages of Christopher Columbus, beginning in 1492, despite his customary designation as the discoverer of America, despite the incredible action of a legislature and a governor here in the State of Minnesota – back in 1945, I'm told it was – making next Tuesday, Columbus Day, a legal holiday, the historians recognize Leif Erikson as the discoverer of America, in the year 1000.

Columbus was no more the discoverer of America than you or I. He never saw the North American mainland. He got to the island of San Salvador in 1492. He visited the South American mainland later. But as a discoverer he was a full five hundred years late, as far as this continent is concerned.

Some seek to inject a religious note into arguments that may arise as to Christopher Columbus and Leif Erikson. Because the Knights of Columbus is a Catholic organization, one occasionally hears even some Scandinavians rather indignant about that church fostering the myth that Columbus discovered this country. Actually, the Catholic Church has equal claim on Leif Erikson. He was the first Catholic missionary into the New World, having accepted the Christian faith at the court of King Olav Tryggvason, the first Christian monarch of Norway, in the year 999.

Leif Erikson had two priests with him, intending to Christianize his pagan father, Erik the Red, and the rest of his family, then in Greenland, when he stumbled upon the North American mainland in the year 1000. Let us never forget that in the period of which we're speaking now, more than 900 years ago, when we say Christian, we might equally well say Catholic. For Christianity had no exponent in the world then other than the Catholic Church. Students at St. Olaf

College, or people interested in that institution, ought to be particularly aware of that fact – for that Lutheran institution is named for a Catholic saint.

At this point, some listeners may have begun to wonder by what stretch of the imagination this broadcast can be considered one dealing with an immigrant contribution to the “Making of America.” That will, I hope, become more evident as the recital moves along. I intend to discuss briefly the attempted Viking colonization of America – right here on our own mainland, and not merely in nearby Greenland – between the years 1003 and 1006. The Icelandic sagas contain the detailed record. They are the best sources as to the Viking voyages of discovery. For that matter, did it ever occur to any of you who stem from Norway that you would not know Norway's early history at all if it were not for the Icelandic sagas?

For purposes of this discussion, however, I would rather use other sources than the sagas – corroborative sources that show the record they preserve is more than a succession of boastful claims about long-departed ancestors. The best such evidence, both as to the discovery of America and the early attempt at its colonization, is to be found in Catholic sources. In preparing this morning's broadcast, I have beside me a large, 826-page volume. It is the first in a 15-volume set, *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, bearing the subtitle, *An International Work of Reference on the Constitution, Doctrine, Discipline, and History of the Catholic Church*. It was published in New York in 1907 under the imprimatur of John H. Farley, then Archbishop of New York.

Take a look at it sometime, whether you happen to be Catholic or Protestant, and in doing so look on page 416 of that first volume. The heading is: “America – Pre-Columbian Discovery of.” And then follows over seven pages of its finely printed text, one of the best and most authoritative brief treatments of Leif Erikson's discovery of America that has been printed in the English language. I'm going to read some excerpts

from that first volume of *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, beginning as follows:

“Of all the alleged discoveries of America before the time of Columbus, only the bold voyages of exploration of the fearless Vikings to Greenland and the American mainland can be considered historically certain. Although there is an inherent probability for the fact of other pre-Columbian discoveries of America, all accounts of such discoveries (Phoenician, Irish, Welsh and Chinese) rest on testimony too vague or too unreliable to justify a serious defense of them. For the oldest written evidence of the discovery of Greenland and America by the Northmen, we are indebted to Adam, a canon of the Church of Bremen, who about 1067 went to Bremen, where he devoted himself very earnestly to the study of Norse history. Owing to the vigorous missionary activity of Archbishop Adelbert of Bremen (who died in 1072), this ‘Rome of the North’ offered the ‘best field for such work, being the much frequented center of the great northern missions, which were spread over Norway and Sweden, Iceland and Greenland.’ Moreover, Adam of Bremen found a most trustworthy source of information in the Danish King, Sven Estrithson, who ‘preserved in his memory, as though engraved, the entire history of the barbarians.’” (He meant there the northern peoples.)

I am still quoting from this same section of *The Catholic Encyclopedia*: “Of the lands discovered by the Northmen in America, Adam mentions only Greenland and Vinland. The former he describes as an island in the northern ocean, about as far from Norway as Iceland (five to seven days), and he expressly states that envoys from Greenland and Iceland had come to Bremen to ask for preachers of the Gospel. The Archbishop granted their request, even giving the Greenlanders assurances of a speedy visit in person. Adam’s information concerning Vinland was no less trustworthy than his knowledge of Greenland. According to him, the land took its name from the excellent wild grapes that abounded there. ... Adam’s testimony is of the highest importance to us, not only as being the oldest written account of Norse discoveries in America, but also because it is entirely independent of Icelandic writings, and rests directly on Norse traditions, which were at the time still recent. The second witness is Ari Thorgilsson (Ari the Learned, who died in 1148), the oldest and most trustworthy of all the historians of Iceland. Like Adam, Ari is conscientious in citing the sources of his information. His authority was his uncle, Thorkell Gellisson, who in turn was indebted for the details of the discovery and settlement of Greenland to a companion of the discoverer himself.”

I now conclude this quoted excerpt from Volume I of *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. I could continue it far beyond the time allotted this broadcast. I shall summarize briefly what it says about the attempted



PHOTO: STEFAN JONASSON

The ghosts of the Norse explorers still linger at L'Anse aux Meadows

colonization along our Atlantic seaboard. Erik the Red had laid the foundations for a colony that lasted several hundred years in Greenland, which he discovered in 982. He was originally from the province of Jaederen in southern Norway, was outlawed for manslaughter, moved to the then thriving new republic of Iceland, married there – his wife, by the way, a native of Iceland – settled on the farm to which he gave his own name, Eiriksstadir, in western Iceland, but unfortunately didn’t change his habits with his change in residence.

He was finally outlawed from Iceland for using the sword “not wisely but too well,” so he was actually in quest of “new worlds to conquer” when he stumbled upon the big area to which he gave the name of Greenland in 982. He hoped to draw settlers through the attractive name. And he did. In the spring of 985, 14 shiploads of settlers came from Iceland. There was continuous contact between Norway, Iceland, and Greenland during all these centuries. Leif Erikson grew up in Greenland, which at its height numbered a settlement of probably about 4,000 of Norse origin.

Catholic records show that the Greenland bishopric of Gardar had two monasteries and a convent of Benedictine nuns, the east and the west settlements being served by at least 11 churches. The introduction

of Christianity there was the work of Leif Erikson. He found America in the year 1000 on a voyage intended to take him from Nidaros, Norway’s ancient capital, now Trondheim, to Brattahlid, his father’s home in Greenland. He made three successive landings along our eastern seaboard.

It was in 1003 that Thorfinnur Karlsefni, a rich merchant from Iceland – having married in Greenland Gudridur, the widow of Thorsteinn, a brother of Leif Erikson – organized an expedition to find Vinland – which some think was in the region that is now Massachusetts, though others would place it considerably further north – and to attempt to colonize it. That story, however, is one which I see we shall have to continue next Thursday, as I yield the microphone now to Dean Thompson at St. Olaf College.

This is the first in a series of three radio broadcasts delivered by Val Bjornson in 1948 over the airwaves of WCAL at St. Olaf College. These three broadcasts were the introductory radio lectures of the St. Olaf College series, America in the Making. In the interests of preserving the integrity of this 70-year-old address, we have left the spelling of names and places in their Americanized form rather than converting them to Icelandic.

THE MAKING OF AMERICA

PHOTO: ICELANDIC NATIONAL LEAGUE OF NORTH AMERICA
Val Bjornson, 1906-1987

Kristjan Valdimar (Val) Bjornson was a journalist, broadcaster, and politician in Minnesota, deeply admired by all who knew him. Born in Minneota, MN, on August 29, 1906, he was the son of Gunnar B. Björnson and Ingibjörg Ágústína Hörðal. His father was the local postmaster and proprietor of *The Minneota Mascot* and Val himself served as editor of the paper in the 1930s, after graduating from the University of Minnesota. He was a U.S. Navy intelligence officer in Iceland during World War II, where he met his wife, Guðrún Jónsdóttir. They had five children.

Following the war, Val became associate editor of the *St. Paul Pioneer Press and Dispatch*. He was also an on-air radio personality for KSTP and WCAL. In 1950, he was elected State Treasurer of Minnesota, a position he held for 22 years with one break, when he competed for a seat in the U.S. Senate against Hubert H. Humphrey. A Republican, he was widely respected on both sides of the aisle.

Seventy years ago, in 1948, WCAL launched a series of broadcasts on Thursday mornings from its studio at St. Olaf College in Northfield, MN, on the theme, *America in the Making*. Iceland was selected as the place to begin and Val Bjornson delivered the first three segments of the series, observing that, “Iceland was the earliest link between the old world and the new, almost a thousand years ago.”

Before proceeding to the focus of his remarks for

the first broadcast, on October 7, 1948, Val reminisced about his years in broadcasting, noting that he had appeared before the microphone at WCAL some 800 times, mostly during the two years following the invasion of Norway by the Nazis, when Minnesota’s Scandinavian communities hungered for news from across the sea. “I have never done anything in the field in which I have felt closer to listeners or enjoyed a warmer response from them than was the case with those daily broadcasts of Scandinavian news over more than a two-year period,” he reminisced. “Those broadcasts served personally to heighten an interest that has always been something of a hobby – an interest in the history, the literature and the cultural heritage of Scandinavia in general, and of the land of my own forbears, Iceland.”

A correspondent from Minneapolis recently sent a mimeographed copy of Val’s radio lectures to the office of the Icelandic National League of North America. Recognizing their historical value and their glimpse at Icelandic American thinking about our heritage seven decades ago, we are pleased to have the opportunity to reproduce these lectures in *Lögberg-Heimskringla*. We begin with “The Viking voyagers” and will publish the remaining two lectures, “Modern migrations begin” and “Evaluating the contribution,” in subsequent issues.

Val Bjornson died on March 10, 1987, but he is still fondly remembered in his native Minnesota.

Modern migrations begin



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Icelandic Monument in Spanish Fork

Val Bjornson (1948)

This morning's discussion should bring us nearer modern realities than did the one opening this series last Thursday. Since Dean Thompson decided that this succession of broadcasts on immigrant contributions to "America in the Making" should begin about as close to the top of the map as we can get – with Iceland – it seemed logical last week to discuss the Viking

voyages of discovery. Those voyages, begun more than a thousand years ago, linked in logical sequence across the globe Norway and Iceland and Greenland, and our own North American mainland. It seemed appropriate last Thursday to spend most of our time on those voyages, particularly since we celebrated Leif Erikson Day last Saturday and Columbus Day this past Tuesday.

As to earliest immigrant contributions, we could

continue some discussion of that remote period this morning. The attempted Viking colonization on our Atlantic seaboard, between about the years 1003 and 1006, was mentioned last time. It was in 1003 that Thorfinnur Karlsefni, a rich merchant from Iceland, married a widow in Greenland – Gudridur, whose first husband, Thorsteinn, a brother of Leif Erikson, had died. They organized a party to find the Vinland area, which Leif had discovered three years before, and to settle there. A hundred and fifty of them left Greenland in 1003, getting to Vinland, which some say was in the region of what is Massachusetts now, but which others would place considerably further north. They passed up Helluland, where Leif's party had first landed – so named because of its rocky formation, likely in the northern roaches of Labrador – and also Markland, named for the woods which covered it – probably in the Newfoundland area. And, by the way, Icelandic annals indicate by a casual entry as recently as the late 14th century that the Markland region remained well known, and that periodic trips were made to it not only from Greenland but from Iceland, as well, to secure needed timber from the forests.

The colony formed in Vinland was abandoned after three years because of hostile Indians. The first white child born in America, by the way, was Snorri, the son of Thorfinnur Karlsefni and his wife, Gudridur. On leaving this country's shores, some of those first colonists went back to Greenland, others to Iceland. Thorfinnur wound up in his native Iceland. He died there. His widow became a nun, later made a pilgrimage to Rome.

Snorri, the first native white American, grew to manhood in Iceland, and a long line has descended from him there, justly proud of that ancestry.

I wish I could keep on talking about this early history, recounting events of almost a thousand years ago. It strikes me as fascinating. I am sure that many of you listeners would find it interesting reading. Sources are by no means lacking in the English language; I think that works in English dealing with the Viking voyages of discovery and related topics now number close to 200, if not more. I haven't left you much in the way of specific contributions by those earliest immigrants to American shores – the group headed by Thorfinnur and Gudrid in the year 1003. Obviously, those contributions were not lasting ones because the colony was so short-lived. But a groundwork has been provided through establishment of those early links between Scandinavia and America, and in today's discussion we shall skip down the centuries to Icelandic migration westward in modern times. I shall mention immigration to Canada only in passing, though Icelanders settled there in far larger numbers than they did here, south of the border. If there are today, as some estimate, 40,000 Icelanders and their descendants in North America, then certainly 30,000 of them are in Canada, and no more than 10,000 in the United States.

Reviewing the major migratory moves to this country in briefest recital, just to provide further background, one must begin today's discussion with the year 1856, when the first modern Icelanders come to the United States – a few converts to the Mormon religion, settling in Utah then. The second and far more sizeable group came to Washington Island, off the Door County peninsula in Wisconsin, in 1870. Next came the Minnesota colony, where I am born and brought up myself – in Lyon, Lincoln, and Yellow Medicine counties, here in our own state, launched in 1875 – the same year as the major settlements in Winnipeg and north of there began. Finally, there is the largest Icelandic settlement in the United States – that in Pembina County, North Dakota, begun as an offshoot from the New Iceland colony in Manitoba, in 1878. There is a newer colony at Seattle, Washington, with smaller ones elsewhere in the country.

I shouldn't burden listeners with too minute a chronological record here. But we may as well begin at the beginning in this mass movement of peoples which found Icelanders falling pretty much into step with

other Europeans in giving the nineteenth century its dominant trend – that of large-scale migration from the old world to the new.

It is strange how coincidence often shapes history. It is because of the association of two Icelanders with some Danes that the Mormon colony in Utah had its beginnings. It is because of one Dane's association with some Icelanders that the Washington Island settlement in Wisconsin later came into being. And, as for my own home community at Minnetonka, its Icelandic settlement began solely because one Icelandic and his family cast their lot with Norwegians in Dane County, Wisconsin, and then moved with them by ox-drawn covered wagon to the banks of the Yellow Medicine River, when those Norwegians decided to press further westward, into Minnesota.

But I'm getting ahead of my story. It was in 1851 that two young Icelanders, from the Westman Islands, Thorarinn Hafliðason and Gudmundur Gudmundsson, arrived in Copenhagen to go to a trade school for training in skilled crafts. The year before, two "apostles" from the Salt Lake City settlement of Mormons in Utah had come to Denmark as evangelists for their faith. Their work, and that of others, bore fruit both in Denmark and in Sweden. Nearly 30,000 Scandinavians were converted to the Mormon religion, most of them moving to Utah. Of that number, about 15,000 of them were Danes. These two young Icelanders joined Danish friends in accepting the new faith, and the idea of moving far off to the westward to a new country caught their imaginations. These Icelanders, fired with something of the missionary's zeal themselves, were urged to go back to their homeland to convert more of their countrymen. They did so, confining their efforts mainly to their home district of the Westman Islands, but getting over into the southern part of Iceland's mainland as well.

Thorarinn Hafliðason drowned in 1852, but his companion continued the mission work, joined later by a Dane. There is no point in prolonging that detailed recital. It should suffice to say that the first Icelanders – only a very few – got to Utah in 1856, a larger number joining them the following year, moving in along with Danes to found a settlement in and near Spanish Fork, southeast of Salt Lake City.

Because of early hostility on the part of Lutherans toward the Mormon religion, which at this stage had polygamy as one of its tenets, Icelanders have seldom

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paid much attention to the Utah colony. It had no added recruits from 1857 until in 1874, with a few more coming between that time and 1892. I suppose that at its peak, including Icelanders and their descendants, the colony has never numbered more than 200. But they were proud of their cultural heritage. They sought to maintain the traditions they had brought with them, while becoming excellent citizens of Utah.

One of their number, writing about the Spanish Fork settlement as it existed in the early nineties, says it was acknowledged there that the best carpenter in the village was an Icelander, so was the best blacksmith, the leading painter, the best stonemason, the finest watch repairman – and the best handiwork was that of the Icelandic women. Descendants of this first modern Icelandic settlement in America have been particularly proud of their heritage, and have given that pride a more impressive tangible demonstration than has been the case in any other such community – through the erection, ten years ago, of a pioneer memorial, taking the form of a miniature lighthouse, with appropriately inscribed plaque. As has been true in every Icelandic community in the United States and Canada, a very large proportion of the younger generation have gone on for advanced schooling, supplying more than their share of teachers and professional men.

I shall mention in only a sentence or two another migratory move by Icelanders that had its origins in the Thingeyjarsýsla of northern Iceland, in 186. That's the year formal planning started. They had had a succession of hard winters and other difficulties. The Danish trade monopoly was a continuous source of discontent. And, believe it or not, one of these residents of northern Iceland got the idea they ought to move to Greenland, of all places. He revived a sentimental harking back to history, in the days when colonists left Iceland to settle Greenland, in the year 985 and thereafter. He was soon convinced by neighbors, however, that there would be no gain moving to a spot on the globe that is 97 percent perpetually ice-coated, and a sharp shift in plans came when one of the farm leaders began to study possibilities in Brazil.

They engaged in serious study of the subject over a long period, and at the peak of discussion, no less than 500 had indicated their desire to move to Brazil. The plans encountered one difficulty after another. A Brazilian consul in Copenhagen was to be helpful. He failed to provide the promised help.

What finally happened was that ten years later, in 1873, 34 Icelanders got to Brazil by going first to Copenhagen, then to Hamburg in Germany, and then to Rio de Janeiro. Only a few others joined the group later, in a section populated heavily by German settlers. So there are some descendants of these original Icelanders, speaking Portuguese, there in Brazil, still today.

The migration that really "broke into the ice" and started the westward flood was in 1870. And there comes the coincidental link with a Dane, which I mentioned a while back. His name was William Wickmann, and he came to Iceland in 1855, going to work for Gudmundur Thorgrimsen, *faktor*, an Icelander, who operated the Danish trade monopoly's big mercantile establishment at Eyrarbakki, in southern Iceland. Gudmundur Thorgrimsen, by the way, was the father of the late Rev. Hans Thorgrimsen, who served the Norwegian Lutheran Synod for so long, lived for so many years in Grand Forks, North Dakota, and died not many years ago at the advanced age of more than 85.

This man Wickmann left Iceland for the United States in 1865, going first to Milwaukee. He went from there to Washington Island, off the tip of Wisconsin's Door County peninsula, an island about six miles square, out in Lake Michigan. Wickmann wrote numerous letters to his former employer, Thorgrimsen, back in Eyrarbakki in Iceland. He was lavish in his praise of the new home he had found. In the visiting that naturally proceeded as residents of that area came to the store, there was much talk of America and of the success apparently attending location there on the part of this man they had all known so well. The result was that some others who worked for Thorgrimsen, and a few of their neighbors, too, set out for America in 1870, heading first for Milwaukee and locating then on Washington Island, in a settlement predominantly Norwegian.



PHOTO: PUBLIC DOMAIN / CC0

Washington Island lighthouse

Descendants of these first settlers, always a small colony, still live on Washington Island, where they have earned a livelihood mainly through fishing operations, retaining that close similarity to circumstances in their old homeland.

In 1872, Hans Thorgrimsen joined the Milwaukee group. That same year, a first cousin of his, Pall Thorlaksson, arrived. They both became ministers, joining Norwegians who went in those days to the Missouri Synod institution at St. Louis for their theological work. Pall Thorlaksson became an important figure as to later Icelandic immigration, and was also father of the North Dakota settlement in Pembina County. He died a great many years ago in North Dakota, but his brother, Niels Steingrímur Thorlaksson, who also became a pastor, taking his theological work in Christiania, Norway, died only a few years ago, about 85 years of age. He was the first permanent pastor of the Icelandic settlement at Minneota, coming there in 1887, served Norwegian congregations at Park River, North Dakota, for some years after that, and spent the longest period of his active pastorate at Selkirk, Manitoba.

Milwaukee became the center to which Icelanders arriving in the United States headed. A fairly sizeable number arrived there late in 1873. Some of them were aided in finding temporary homes by the Norwegians in Dane County. Some founded a small Icelandic settlement that lasted only a short time, near Shawano, in

northeastern Wisconsin.

It is from the Dane County settlement stems. And there comes the last of the three coincidences to which I referred some time back. One of those Icelanders given shelter and a helping hand by Norwegian pioneers in Dane County in 1873 was Gunnlaugur Pjetursson (Peterson is the Anglicized form) from Hakonarstadir in Jokuldal, in northeastern Iceland. It was because Norwegian neighbors of his – particularly the Hovdesven family – decided to move on to Minnesota in 1875 that Gunnlaugur and his wife, and a few relatives with them, chose to follow the same course. And thus he became the first Icelandic settler in the State of

Minnesota, taking a homestead in what became Westerheim Township in Lyon County, seven miles northeast of Minneota, on the 4th of July in 1875.

Again, I see it's time for Dean Thompson to take over, and our recital must continue next Thursday.

This is the second in a series of three radio broadcasts delivered by Val Bjornson in 1948 over the airwaves of WCAL at St. Olaf College. These three broadcasts were the introductory radio lectures of the St. Olaf College series, America in the Making. In the interests of preserving the integrity of this 70-year-old address, we have left the spelling of names and places in their Americanized form rather than converting them to Icelandic.

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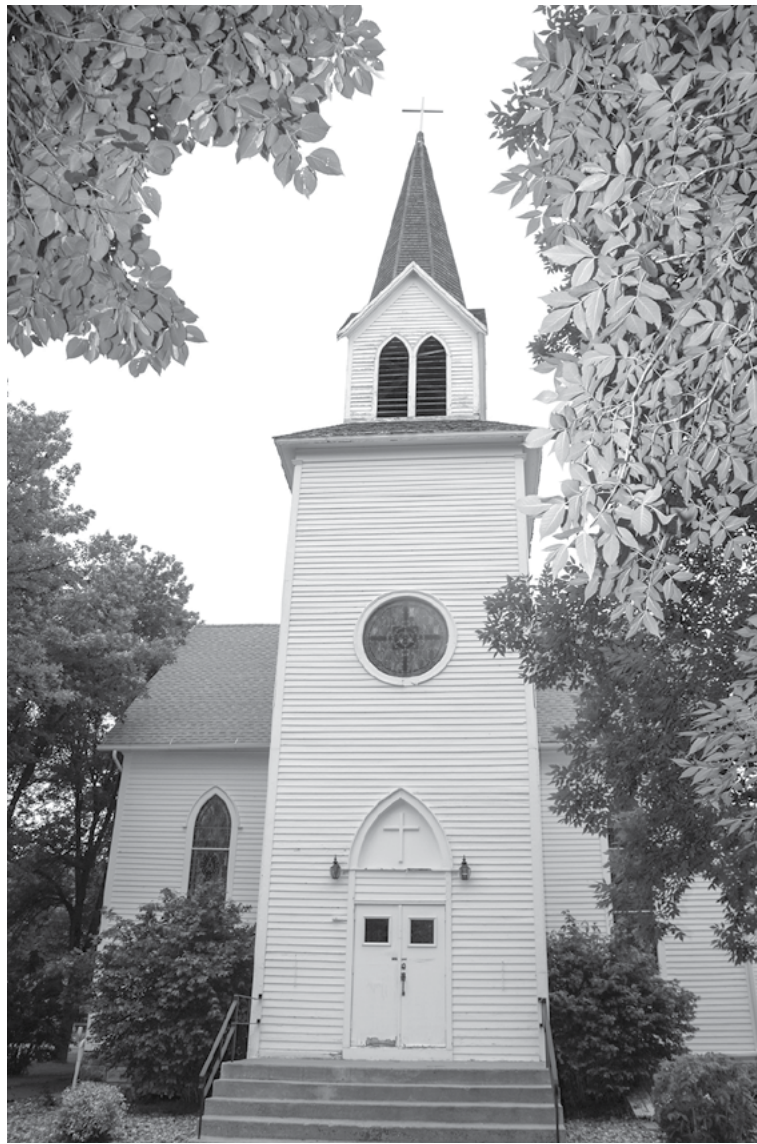


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St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Minneota

EVALUATING THE CONTRIBUTION

Val Bjornson (1948)

While this broadcast is only the third in what is likely to be an extensive series on the theme of “America in the Making,” it is the last on contributions made by Icelandic immigrants toward that evolving composite. In retrospect now, it wasn't so hard to devote the first two Thursday morning quarter-hours to that subject, though we may have gone a bit far afield in doing so. Two weeks ago this morning,

some of you may remember, virtually all of the broadcast went to an account of the Viking voyages of discovery — Leif Erikson's successive landings on our mainland in the year 1000, at points to which he gave the names Helluland, Markland and Vinland; the close ties that joined Norway and Iceland and Greenland in those days, with bridging of the short gap remaining to North America coming as their logical sequel. Then, from brief mention of the first

attempt at colonization under Thorfinnur Karlsefni between the years 1003 and 1006, we skipped down the centuries to the first Icelandic settlement of modern times in the United States, a small Mormon colony established in 1856 at Spanish Fork, Utah. Next came the Washington Island settlement off Wisconsin's Door County peninsula, in 1870 — after a slight digression to cover the colonizing venture made by a few Icelanders to Brazil at about the same time.

We had come to the founding of Minnesota's Icelandic settlement when last week's broadcast ended — the trip made by Gunnlaugur Pjetursson, members of his family, and a few others, from the home they had found in Dane County, Wisconsin, late in 1873. They left with Norwegians who were pressing westward from Dane County in the summer of 1875, and their overland journey by ox-drawn covered wagon, lasting many weeks, did not end until they reached the banks of the Yellow Medicine River, seven miles northeast of the village in which I was born — Minneota, in Lyon County. It was on the 4th of July, 1875, that Gunnlaugur Pjetursson took his homestead there, naming the farm Hakonarstadir, the name borne by his ancestral home in the Jokuldal of northeastern Iceland. When operated in later years by his son-in-law and daughter, Halldor Joseph and Elizabeth Nicholson, it was known as Riverside Farm, and is frequently referred to by that name still.

I must not be carried away by the impulse to reminisce about the “good old days” in a community that will always


be home. Just a few more facts for the historical record, and then my final assignment in this series must begin. And, by the way, that assignment was described for me in a letter from Dean Thompson about this broadcast. “I think it would be fine,” he said, “if in your concluding lecture you would mention something about the Icelandic group's interest in politics and government, art and literature, as well as education, church, editorial work, business, and so on.”

That ought to fill the remaining time. But just to get the migratory moves in proper relationship, let me recall one or two historic facts first. At the same time as Milwaukee was becoming something of a base of operations for Icelanders in the United States between 1870 and 1874, migration to Canada was beginning. First settlements, in 1873, were in Nova Scotia and Ontario. The small group in Milwaukee had been canvassing possibilities for a larger settlement on this side of the line. A group went to Nebraska in quest of land, and a few families did settle there. In addition to the Washington Island colony, there was a settlement in Shawano County, Wisconsin, for a few years, transferred almost bodily to North Dakota in 1878, except for a few who had gone to the Minneota community from there in the meantime.

the beginnings of Icelandic settlement in Minnesota, it also saw the launching of the largest colony of Icelanders on this side of the Atlantic, the New Iceland settlement along the west shore of Lake Winnipeg, north of the city of Winnipeg in Manitoba. That colony began when some of the Ontario settlers were persuaded to move further westward. They came down the lakes to Duluth, across Minnesota by rail to Fisher's Landing on the Red River, south of where Grand Forks stands now, and then by flat-bottomed boat northward along the Red River to Winnipeg. The New Iceland colony was encouraged and strengthened by the man who was then Governor General of Canada, Lord Dufferin, whose book, *Letters from High Latitudes*, showed the friendly interest he had developed in Iceland and Icelanders on his visit there in 1856. As part of Canada's effort to attract settlers to the western provinces, Lord Dufferin made concessions scarcely paralleled in immigration history. He gave these Icelanders what amounted almost to autonomy over an area more than 40 miles long and 11 miles wide, along Lake Winnipeg, and in it they could establish local government and follow forms and customs exactly as they had known them in Iceland.

I mention the New Iceland colony to this somewhat

While 1875 marked



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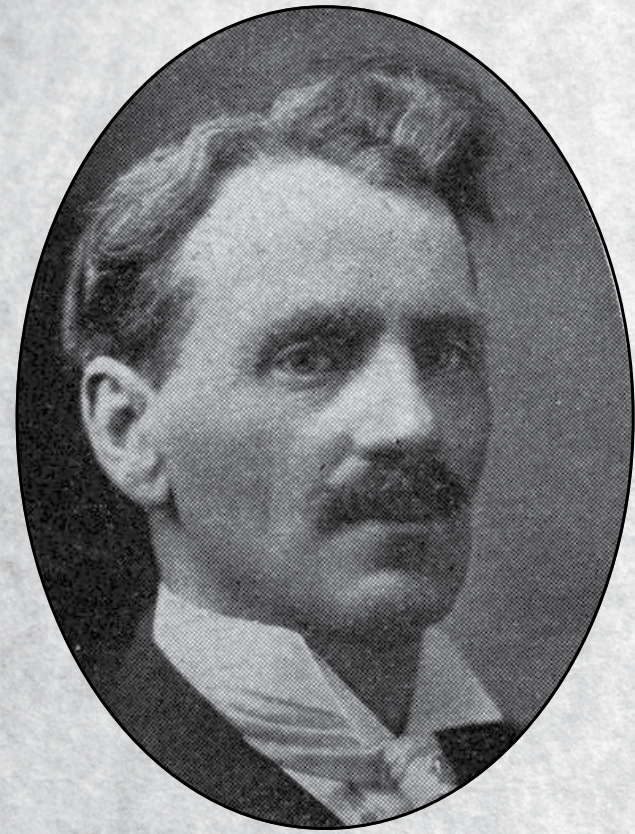
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John B. Gislason



C.M. Gislason



Gunnar B. Bjornson

detailed extent because it became the “mother colony” of the largest Icelandic settlement in the United States, the one which began forming in Pembina County, North Dakota, in 1878. The Argyle settlement, near Glenboro and Cypress River, about a hundred miles west of Winnipeg, was also formed that same year as an offshoot of the original New Iceland colony. Difficulties were indescribable the first two or three years in New Iceland. Immigrants and their families died like flies in smallpox epidemics that raged two winters in succession. Brush had to be cleared, sloughs drained, trees felled, shelter of some sort provided – the one gift of an otherwise grudging Nature being actually Lake Winnipeg itself, where fishing operations have provided the main sustenance for the settlers all those years.

Minute details as to those settlements will have to be glossed over now in a necessary approach to the larger, though certainly vaguer, task of attempted evaluation. It was because an Icelander threw his lot with some Dane County Norwegians that the Minnesota settlement came into being 73 years ago last summer. Gunnlaugur Pjetursson was joined in the next year or two by more of his former neighbors who had spent a while in Wisconsin – Sigmundur Jonatansson, father of J.H. Jonathan at Minneota; Magnus Gislason, father of the late C.M. Gislason, lawyer and member of the State Legislature from Lincoln County, who died here in Minneapolis only a few years ago, after having served on the State Board of Grain Appeals for some time; and Loftur Jonasson, father of Mrs. F.C. Zeuthen, a former Minneotan now living in Minneapolis, and of the well-known contractor at Aberdeen, South Dakota, S.W. Jonasson.

Soon there were arrivals in Minneota direct from Iceland – my grandmother, Kristin Benjaminsdottir, and my father, Gunnar Bjornson, among them, in 1876. My dad wasn't quite four years old at the time. The largest single group to come to Minneota from Iceland arrived in the summer of 1879 – 70 years ago this summer. Practically every one of them came from the Vopnafjordur area in northeastern Iceland. There were about 160 in that group, prominent among them being Bjorn Gislason, who settled just across the river from the original pioneer, Gunnlnugur Pjetursson, on land that Eirikur Bergmann had homesteaded, but sold on moving to North Dakota.

There were a few families from the Minneota community who moved to the North Dakota settlement after it was started, in 1878 – the three best known have left a lasting imprint in the record of contributions made by Icelandic immigrants, both in this country and Canada – Eirikur Bergmann, Kristinn Olafsson and Jon

Brandsson. Hjalmar Bergman, son of the first named, became a renowned lawyer in Winnipeg, after leaving his North Dakota home; he died there last spring, a member then of Manitoba's Supreme Court.* Rev. K.K. Olafsson, son of Kristinn Olafsson, born in Pembina County shortly after his parents left the Minneota community, graduated from Luther College, became president of the Icelandic Lutheran Synod, and is now serving a ULC congregation in a Chicago suburb.** Dr. B.J. Brandsson, Jon Brandsson's son, practiced medicine in Winnipeg for years, going there from North Dakota; he was just a boy when he came from Iceland with his parents to the Minneota community, and when he died in Winnipeg a few years ago, he was one of the best-known surgeons in Canada, and had long taught medicine at the University of Manitoba, in addition to his practice.

But I digress to interrelations between the Minneota, the North Dakota, and the Winnipeg settlements, from first mention of Bjorn Gislason. Perhaps the mention of specific names should have been avoided in this section of the broadcast. Yet, to cover several phases of our attempted evaluation of contributions by Icelandic immigrants, mention of the Gislason family serves as one of the better examples. The pioneering father, who died his farm northeast of Minneota in 1904, brought a sizeable family with him from Iceland, all of whom have brought distinction to their own small national group. Walter was for years in the hardware business in Minneota, was postmaster for a considerable period too; Thorvaldur was his real name. He died in the spring of 1949. Bjorn, who died in Marshall some 15 years ago, was an attorney of widely recognized ability, active as a real estate man, prominent in Democratic politics; his son, Sidney, practices law in New Ulm now. John is still operating the old home farm in Westerheim, but he served Lyon County for ten years in the State Legislature, with real distinction. Halldor died in 1947 in Minneapolis; he had been a professor of speech, director of the university's radio station, head of its extension division's community service department, in a career extending over more than 30 years on the faculty of the University of Minnesota. Arni is the youngest – a lawyer in partnership with his brother, Bjorn, at Minneota for years, and for more than 20 years one of Minnesota's best jurists, as district judge of the Ninth Judicial District, living at New Ulm. He has since been succeeded by his nephew, Bjorn's son, Sidney Gislason, elected district judge in November, 1950, without opposition.

Dean Thompson's letter to me says: “I am very sincere in suggesting that you should mention some of the contributions your father has made to the State of

Minnesota.” That would be taking unfair advantage of listeners, but a point or two could be mentioned, solely for illustrative purposes. The illustration has numerous parallels. It was in the school of pioneering hard knocks that my father received most of his education. Tending Minneota's town herd as a boy in the days when almost every villager kept a cow, working on farms among the Norwegians who surrounded us and learning the Valdris dialect he has never forgotten, clerking in a store, reading law for two years in C.M. Gislason's law office in Minneota, Gunnar Bjornson entered newspaper work first as part owner of the *Minneota Mascot* in 1895, became its sole editor and publisher in 1900, selling what had become a family institution 44 years later, after having raised a number of printers and editors in the persons of his sons, who just about grew up in that printshop. He served in the State Legislature in 1913 and 1915, was chairman of the Republican State Central Committee in 1914, moved to the Twin Cities in 1925 on his appointment to the old State Tax Commission, and has been on the State Board of Tax Appeals since its creation in 1939. He and his wife, born in Iceland, too, but reared in settlements in Saskatchewan and Winnipeg, will leave their six children no legacy of material riches. But the heritage they are passing on is typical, I feel, of the Icelandic immigrant contribution – something of a passion for learning, a questful desire for education, in and out of school, a love of good books, and of poetry, an interest in civic affairs, an abiding regard for the best attributes of the Icelandic heritage, both as to its inspiring history and its brilliant literature, ancient and modern, and for the beautiful language which moans so much in conveying that heritage.

* *Hjalmar A. Bergman was a justice of the Manitoba Court of Appeal, the highest court at the provincial level.*

** *ULC refers to the United Lutheran Church in America, which was created by the merger of three historically German synods in 1918. The Icelandic Evangelical Lutheran Synod joined the ULC in 1942. As part of the ULC, the Icelandic Lutheran Synod became part of the Lutheran Church in America in 1962.*

This is the third in a series of three radio broadcasts delivered by Val Bjornson in 1948 over the airwaves of WCAL at St. Olaf College. These three broadcasts were the introductory radio lectures of the St. Olaf College series, America in the Making. In the interests of preserving the integrity of this 70-year-old address, we have left the spelling of names and places in their Americanized form rather than converting them to Icelandic.